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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001293

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DS/IP/ITA; PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: BURMA'S INFLATION FUELS A RISE IN CRIME

REF: RANGOON 1203

1. (U) Summary: With unusual candor, the Director General of the Burma police acknowledged the existence of serious crime in Rangoon on October 23 and described a new campaign to combat it. The recent crime wave coincides with a 750% increase in petrol prices, which caused further inflation in consumer goods and bus fares. The price increases have made traveling to work and feeding families much more difficult for Burma's silent majority. Rangoon residents have begun taking greater security precautions to fight increased petty crime and robbery. End Summary.

POLICE ACKNOWLEDGE A PROBLEM

2. (U) In an unusual official acknowledgment of a serious problem at a stage-managed "press conference" on October 28, Brigadier General Khin Yi, Director General of the Burma police force (a branch of the military), responded to questions about the perceived increase in serious and petty crime in Rangoon. He stated that there were "eighty-three serious crimes" in Rangoon from May through August (before the recent increase), compared with ninety-three from January through April 2005. He also claimed the police are pursuing the attacker of three women found murdered in their Rangoon home in September. The police are promoting "Crime-Free Weeks" in different parts of the city, and will conduct surveys in crime-prone areas.

3. (U) Economic hardship may be the most likely reason for the jump in the crime rate. Food and transportation prices have increased significantly over the past two months (Reftel). The cost of the basket of staple goods used by typical low-income families rose 5.9% from September to October, according to Embassy research. Rice prices have increased 8% since September, and 14% since July. The prices of some essential items, such as fish, beans, onions and toothpaste, rose as much as 50% during October. A sudden 100-500% hike in bus fares has forced many workers to stay at home or work on reduced schedules. The Planning Department of the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development provides a K.200 (about \$.16) transportation subsidy per day to its employees, which has helped ameliorate the impact on those employees. Yet they are the only ones we have heard getting any increase.

EVERYONE IS AFFECTED

4. (U) Sources in contact with the police report that the increased burglaries and robberies have not been accurately reflected in official police statistics. In a city of over six million that enjoyed a generally low crime rate, recent incidents have made some Rangoon residents take unusual (for them) new security precautions, including locking all doors, not traveling alone and not staying home alone at night. Taxi drivers now refuse to bring passengers to some neighborhoods after dark.

5. (SBU) The United Nations (UN) Security Officer reported an increase in robberies among UN personnel in Rangoon. RSO police contacts in Mandalay told Emboff that the GOB recently added more tourist police in the city in response to a surge in crimes reported by Western tourists.

COMMENT: POLICE CANDOR IN A POLICE STATE

6. (SBU) Comment: In a "shoot the messenger" police state like Burma, few willingly report or confirm bad news. The fact that a senior police official revealed the existence of a problem and actions taken in response constitutes official confirmation that the public has reason to take precautions. At his "press conference", the DG neglected to include statistics on Rangoon crime rates for September and October, after the fuel price increase and other inflation began to hit home. Other factors contributing to inaccurate reporting are inefficient collection methods and the fact that many victims avoid contact with the authorities. The crime situation now has reached a level where the police feel compelled to respond to public concerns, a very unusual display of public accountability in Burma. End comment.

